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# SCHOOL CLOSURES

And Their Impact on Local Communities

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## Introduction

Due to a number of factors, traditional school closings and consolidations have become very common in cities across the United States. Many forces at play cause a public school district to shut down or merge neighborhood schools. The reasons most commonly cited are significant reductions in enrollment or underutilization, market competition from newly formed charter schools, and poor academic performance. School closures also tend to affect students of color, low-income students, and students with special educational needs disproportionately. Since the beginning of this phenomenon, a significant amount of attention has been placed on the impact of school closings on student performance for obvious reasons, yet little work has been done to analyze the impact of such neighborhood school instability on communities as a whole.

The Atlanta Schools District, which has struggled publicly in the last decade, has a long history of school closures and faces a widening gap between the rich and the poor, which undermines most parts of the educational process. The district has a significant dropout rate, and a large number of underperforming schools. And in an attempt to remedy many of the district's issues, Atlanta is now transitioning into a Charter System, a school management structure that is relatively new nationwide and that, by design, requires a strong community and governing body to ensure local school success.

This project seeks to identify school closures and consolidations across the Atlanta School District, examine how this school instability differs across the district, and what may be the correlation between neighborhood school instability and the success of surrounding communities.

The findings of this research can be used to make informed decisions that will strengthen communities that have experienced frequent public education disruptions due to closures and consolidations. The report will first focus on understanding the American public school system and national school closure trends. It will then focus on the state of Georgia and its history of school closures, as well as school closures in the Atlanta School District. A discussion on data collection and results follow. The collected

data will be analyzed, and lastly, I will make recommendations to community members, the planning community, and policy makers to better prepare communities that have been negatively impacted thus far.

## American Public Educational System

The United States public school system is made up of approximately 98,500 elementary and secondary schools in 14,000 school districts across the nation that educate over 50 million students (US Census Bureau, 2012). In 2015, an estimated \$559 billion were spent in education and districts spent an average of \$10,658 per pupil (ATLAS, 2015). The national graduation rate, the number of ninth graders who graduate within four years, is 81 percent, although this varies drastically across the country and by student subgroups. In 2013, Idaho's graduation rate was 90 percent, while the District of Columbia only graduated 63 percent of its students (Education Week, 2015).

## Funding and Governance

Power over public education is shared between the federal government and states, with states exercising most of the control. The federal government contributes about 12 percent of all direct expenditures in primary and secondary schools across the country, but the amount varies by state. In North Dakota, for example, the federal government's share of the state's public school funding is about 16 percent total, while in New Jersey, its share is less than four percent (ATLAS, 2015). Most of the funding from the federal government comes from the Department of Education, however, other government agencies such as the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Human Health and Services provide funding as well.

The Department of Education spent approximately \$79 million in 2014, and it uses a variety of formulas and competitive grants to distribute the money (ATLAS, 2015). The agency's job is to establish policy, coordinate educational federal spending, and implement laws pertaining to education (US Department of Education, 2015). The amount disbursed by the federal government has increased in the last two decades due

to educational reforms such as No Child Left Behind enacted in 2001, Race to the top in 2009, and Common Core; giving it more control than at any other time in history.

The US public education system is, however, highly decentralized. Funding of public schools used to be heavily financed by local governments, but this trend shifted in the 70's. Today, states shoulder most of the public education costs and use primarily income from property and sales taxes to fund the schools (ATLAS, 2016). They are responsible for setting overall educational standards and delegate power over to county, city, or township-level school boards that exercise control over a school district (US Census Bureau, 2012). Elected school boards are in turn responsible for public school curricula, budgets, and policies.

### Charter School Systems

The governance structure described above has been standard for many years. But since the introduction of charter schools in the 1990s, some states have begun to look at charter schools' governance structure as a model for traditional schools. Charter school systems are contracts between the state Board of Education and a local school districts that give the school systems flexibility and autonomy in exchange for a "higher degree of accountability for raising student achievement" (Georgia Department of Education, 2015).

In a charter system, a board of directors makes school decisions about what to teach, what programs to incorporate, personnel, or how to allocate funds. Each school within the system has its own board often comprised of school staff, parents and community members. The district's board of education can however, override decisions made by individual school boards (Atlanta Public Schools, 2016).

As of the publishing of this report, the state of Georgia has 40 contracts with school systems across the state, including Fulton County Schools and Atlanta Public Schools. The Charter Act of 1998 allows individual nonprofit organizations to apply for a charter. This is also extended to entire school systems. If a district's application is approved, all

schools within the district, unless clearly stated in the charter, become charter schools for the length of the charter agreement (GADOE, 2015).

Atlanta Public Schools (APS) became a charter system as of July 1, 2016, and it holds a five-year contract with the Georgia Board of Education (GADOE, 2016). Individual schools in the Atlanta school district are governed by local school governance teams (LSGT) called GO Teams, as some authority has been distributed from the central office to the school level.

### Public School Types

The US public school system consists of traditional schools, often called neighborhood schools, magnet schools, and most recently, charter schools. Neighborhood schools tend to serve children within a given attendance zone, for which the lines are drawn by the local school boards. School option, a result of school reforms, has allowed some students to choose traditional schools outside of their neighborhood. This is usually due to parents opting to move their children from schools that fail to meet set standards by laws such as No Child Left Behind.

Magnet schools have been around since the 60's as a response to desegregation. They were originally established as an option for parents who wanted to desegregate without having their children bussed out of their neighborhood. Until the early 1970's, federal district courts ordered school districts to desegregate themselves. The courts then approved special enrichment programs to "overcome the effects of past discrimination" when they declined to approve a multiple district solution to segregation in Detroit. As a result of this decision, most court orders that mandated desegregation from that point on had a voluntary component. These voluntary desegregated schools became known as magnet schools. (Magnet Schools of America, 2013)

Magnet schools not only serve as one of the few desegregated public options in many school districts, they are also designed to focus on a particular interest while simultaneously following state, district, or Common Core standards in all subjects.

These themes may include the arts, career and technical education, environmental science, etc. Most magnet schools do not have entrance criteria, but they do sometimes rely on randomized lottery systems for admission (Magnet Schools of America, 2013). The number of magnet schools has grown although not at the same rate as charter schools. Their number jumped from about 1,500 in 2000 to 3,200 in 2012 (Digest of Education Statistics, 2015).

Charter schools are the most recent addition to the public school options. These are schools that are publicly funded but are managed by a group or organization under a legislative contract or charter. Some states allow charter schools to be run by for-profit companies although this practice is becoming increasingly rare due to the failure of some of these groups. A school's charter is reviewed by the group or jurisdiction that granted the charter; usually every 3 to 5 years. Their contract can be revoked if the school has not met their requirements or if curriculum and management guidelines outlined in their charter have not been followed (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Charter schools receive the same per pupil spending amount as the local public schools, but may use this funding at their discretion; including teacher pay. Most accept students from across a district through a preset lottery process and are not obligated to provide transportation as do traditional schools.

Charter schools originated in 1991 in Minnesota, and 42 states, as well as the District of Columbia, have passed similar charter school legislation since. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), no charters were in operation as of the 2012-2013 school year in Kentucky, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, Alabama, and West Virginia. The percentage of public schools that are charter schools increased from 1.7 percent in 2000 to 6.2 percent in 2012. The state of California has the largest number of students enrolled in charter schools; approximately 8% of their student population, but the District of Columbia enrolls the largest percentage of its public school students, at 42% during the 2012-2013 school year. It should also be noted that for the same school year, the percentage of students attending high-poverty schools, schools in which more than 75% of the student body qualifies for

free or reduced lunch, was higher for charter schools at 36% than for traditional public schools at 23% (US Department of Education, 2016).

### Important cases

The American school system is largely shaped by Supreme Court decisions such as *Plessy vs. Ferguson* and *Brown vs. the Board of Education*. Both of these cases have had a significant impact on the education system. The first allowed districts to legally ignore the right of a quality education to a portion of its students, while the second set in motion desegregation battles that shaped the educational landscape for the last 60 years.

*Plessy vs. Ferguson* was a landmark United States Supreme Court decision of 1896 that upheld the constitutionality of state segregation laws under the doctrine of “separate but equal.” Homer Plessy, who challenged a Louisiana Law that violated the 14th Amendment, brought suit to the courts. The Separate Car Act required railroad passengers to be segregated by race as long as the facilities were equal in quality. The Supreme Court’s decision legitimized a host of state laws establishing racial segregation in many aspects of life, including education, erasing in many states the Reconstruction Era efforts (Anderson, 2004). The law gave states the right to discriminate against its black citizens, and in most cases, this included denying black children access to quality education.

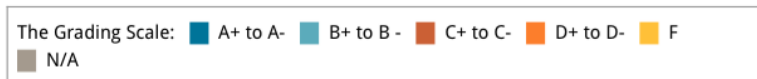
In 1954, the Supreme Court case of *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka*, overturned the 1896 *Plessy vs. Ferguson* decision as it applied to public education. The *Brown* decision declared laws establishing separate public schools for black and white students to be unconstitutional, and it stated that separate educational facilities were inherently unequal. However, the unanimous decision did not outline how the desegregation of schools was to take place (Gitlin, 2008). It left the process up to district courts, thus throwing the American educational system into an internal battle that is still being fought today. Many local leaders opted to close schools, and at times entire school districts, rather than to integrate their students.



## Achievement Equity

Education policy is becoming uniform across the country. However, state school systems are far from equal. Education Week, a national newspaper that covers K-12 education, publishes a yearly report titled Quality Counts. The report grades states based on three categories, Chance for Success, K-12 Achievement, and School Finances. The Chance for Success category takes into account parent education and employment, family income, child schooling and employment opportunities after college. K-12 Achievement measures graduation rates based on the percentage of ninth graders who graduate within 4 years, and School Finances looks at cost-adjusted per pupil spending and how equitably spending is distributed across the districts within each state (Frohlich, 2015). The US as a whole received a C average with 74.4 according to this metric in the 2016 report. The map below shows a breakdown of the states as determined by the Education Week Research Center. Massachusetts had the highest score with a B, and Mississippi the lowest with a D (Quality Counts, 2016).

### Overall Grades & Scores (2016)



**U.S. Score = C (74.4)**

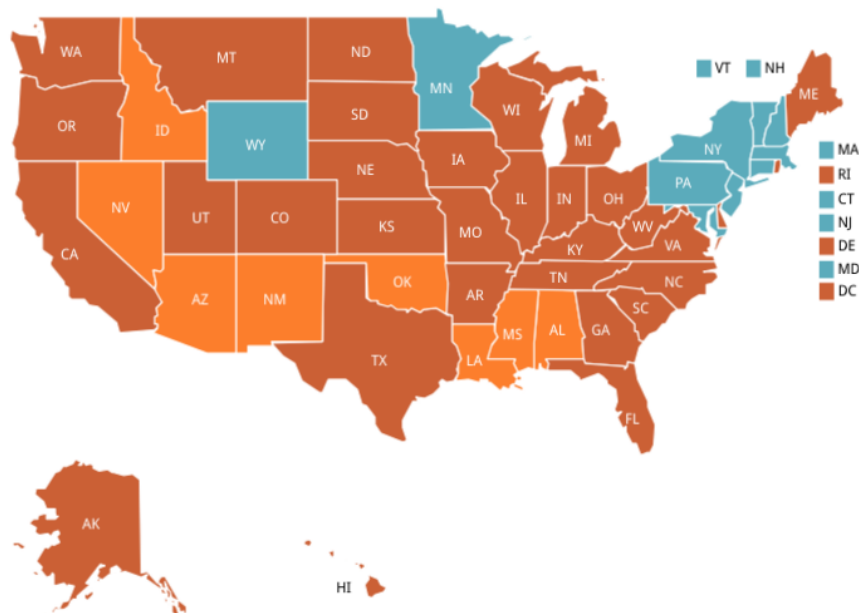


Figure 1: Grading of state educational performance for 2016; Source: Quality Counts

## Equity in Funding

According to the report, the five top ranked states are Massachusetts, New Jersey, Vermont, Maryland, and Connecticut. The lowest five ranking states include Nevada, Mississippi, New Mexico, Idaho, and Alabama. How schools are funded has a great deal to do with how well students perform and how attractive a community becomes.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2012, the federal government contributed 10 percent of the national public educational funding, states contributed approximately 45 percent, and local governments furnished the remaining 45 percent. States' contribution varies greatly. In some states, the state government's share of the education funding is as high as 82 percent, while others contribute a merely 29 percent (ATLAS, 2015). This variation in state funding means that states that depend heavily on local property tax to fund their schools instead of state funds, often experience greater disparity between districts within the state.

Furthermore, disparity in funding can be seen within districts themselves, although this often goes unnoticed. School districts can allocate more resources to some schools by how they place teachers. Teachers, being education's strongest asset, can be placed so that experienced, well paid teachers end up in schools with low needs, while less experienced, underpaid teachers are placed in schools with greater needs. (Federal Education Funding Project, 2012)

## Educational Reforms

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), signed into law by President Bush in 2002, was an update to the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The ESEA was designed to solidify the federal government's role in the public school system. It offered more than \$1 billion dollars annually to help schools with the cost of educating disadvantaged students under its first statutory section called Title I (Klein, 2016).

The NCLB law required all students be “proficient” in math and reading by the school year 2013-2014. Although states did not have to comply with the new requirements, they risked losing federal Title 1 funding. States were required to test students in grades such as third, fifth, eighth and once in high school, and report proficiency levels for all students and “subgroups” such as English Language Learners, students in special education, low-income students and minorities. The law also required teachers to be “highly qualified”, and it required states to evenly distribute these teachers among poor and wealthy schools (Lohman, 2010).

Schools were kept on track towards this goal by a mechanism known as “adequate yearly progress” or AYP. Not meeting AYP had a host of consequences for schools. Some consequences included allowing students to transfer to better performing schools after not making AYP for two years, offering free tutoring after not meeting AYP for three years, (both of which required schools to set aside a portion of their Title I money), and face state intervention. State interventions could take the form of school shutdowns, being taken over by charter schools, being ran by the state itself and a number of other turnaround interventions (Klein, 2016).

There were, since its inception, problematic aspects of the law, starting with the ambitious request that all students in the country be proficient within a relatively short time frame. For one, states were allowed to set their own standards and produce the tests to measure proficiency. Critics argued that the math and reading focus were causing other important subjects to be ignored, and that it resulted in too much testing. Moreover, the funding levels that were outlined in the law, were never met. According to Education Week, by year 2007, annual funding for Title I was supposed to rise to \$25 billion, but by fiscal year 2015 Title I only received about \$14.5 billion.

When it became obvious that states were not going to be able to meet the high standards set by NCLB, the Obama administration offered states waivers. The waivers, now in place in 42 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, allow states not to comply with many of the NCLB laws as long as they adapt other measures outlined by the White

House. States no longer have to reach proficiency by the set date, which has long passed, for example. In exchange, states have to set standards that prepare students for higher education and the workforce, for which the Common Core Standards is the top choice, institute teacher evaluation systems that take into account student scores, single out 15 percent of their schools for turnaround efforts, and allow the growth of charter schools.

President Obama also introduced Race to the Top (RTTT), a competitive grant program that serves as an incentive to further reform states' education systems. RTTT is designed to address many of the same issues as NCLB. The difference lies in that NCLB requires states to make reforms in order to continue receiving federal funds they are already getting, and the RTTT is voluntary. Enacted in 2009 by the federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, the RTTT is intended to stir competition among states vying for additional moneys to use ever more "sophisticated ways of measuring student, teacher, and school performance." (Lohman, 2010)

## School Closings

School closings are not new. Throughout American history, schools have closed for a variety of reasons. Schools that were once ran by small communities in an effort to preserve religious beliefs, for example, had to adjust or close when faith was removed from the public classroom. Desegregation brought on a high number of closures in the 1960s as school districts lost a vast number of white families who began to make their way to the suburbs (Kruse, 2000). Economic downturns throughout history have also caused the closure of schools in districts that lost a considerable amount of their property tax base. Most recently, the closure of schools deemed ineffective has become central to school reform efforts from both federal and state governments. Whether through market competition or government intervention, closing underperforming schools has become common, yet little is known about their impact (Larson, 2014). The graph below shows the number of schools that closed across the country between the years of 2000 and 2014.

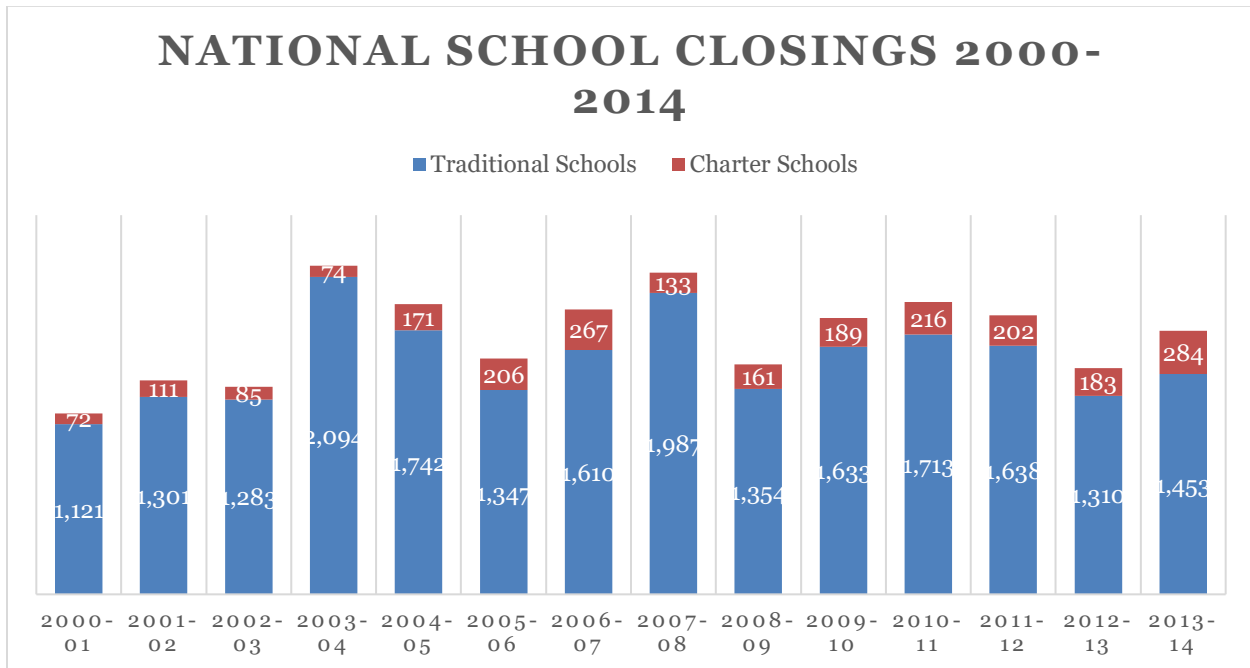


Figure 2. National school closings from 2000-2014; Source: US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Table 216.95.

### Underutilization

Underutilization of schools or low-enrollment is one of the most commonly cited causes of public school closures. A significant drop in enrollment makes it nearly impossible for a district to keep often large, costly schools open. Underutilization of schools can come from a variety of causes. Depopulation of communities, student population shifts, suburbanization, and natural disasters are some examples.

The depopulation of once thriving cities is responsible for a great number of closed schools. Depopulation of cities can occur for a number of reasons. In some cities, such as Detroit, the number of residents dropped at alarming rates after the collapse of the city's major industry. The mass exodus as a result of lost jobs in the motor industry, resulted in the closure of many schools. The city lost 33.7 percent of its households with children as the population in the city of Detroit dropped by 25 percent between 2000 and 2010 (Gardner, 2016).

An example of rapid depopulation that results in massive school closures is natural disasters such as hurricane Katrina. The city of New Orleans experienced a massive drop in population over night. Some displaced residents were forced to permanently relocate since returning to their neighborhoods was out of the question due to lack of resources and the state of the city for years after the break of the levees. Other residents were away for a significant amount of time, and the public school system in New Orleans experienced a complete overhaul during its residents' absence.

Suburbanization is also an example of how population shifts can cause schools in cities to close. The 1960's and 70's saw a mass population shift of primarily white families from city centers to ever expanding suburbs. Highway systems that made commuting to work from previously undeveloped land a possibility, drained inner-cities of school age children and the property tax revenue that once funded traditional public schools. Much of the population shift experienced over these decades was due to the mandated desegregation imposed on school districts around the country (Kruse, 2000). White families who qualified for low-interest loans thanks to new housing policies, left the cities in droves rather than to integrate their schools.

Racial desegregation also caused a spike in private schools during the late 60's and early seventies. White families formed private, racially segregated schools, both in the cities and rural areas. Between 1967 and 1970, the number of primary and secondary private schools increased fivefold in Georgia to about 50,000 schools (Moffson, 2010). This shift in the white student population drained many of the state's public schools. With fewer students in public schools, many newly built black schools closed as district courts finally demanded desegregation. In towns where two high schools existed, one black and one white, the black school was most often closed, as it was nearly impossible to force white parents to send their children to a previously black school. This was common practice despite the fact that black schools were often most recently built.

### Market competition

The Pew Charitable Trust did a study of school closures and the fate of the emptied school properties in 12 school districts across the nation. The 2013 study showed that more than 40% of the closed school buildings were leased, sold to, or reused by charter schools. Although charter schools appear to be obvious successors of such properties, there has been significant disagreement on whether this fact further exacerbates the traditional school closure issue.

The introduction and growth of the charter school sector around the country has been criticized as one of the main factors responsible for the decline in student enrollment in district-run schools. According to Cami Anderson, former superintendent of public schools in New Jersey, this is a fact that has been cheered by private funders who firmly believe that charter schools inject a healthy dose of competition into a broken school system; a system that has thus far been run as a monopoly. In an opinion piece published by Education Weekly, Anderson wrote that, “when students leave a traditional school to attend a charter, the money goes with them, along with jobs and contracts that sustain fragile economies and fuel local politics.” He also noted that while well performing charters offered better options for lottery winners, they could make things worse for students who lost.

In response, Newark created a one-stop enrollment system for all schools, district and charter, to ensure that all students had equal opportunity to attend a school of their choice. This practice is not a common one, however. The vast majority of charter schools design their student lottery process, and unlike district schools, have the freedom to turn students away if they fail to adjust to the “school’s culture.”

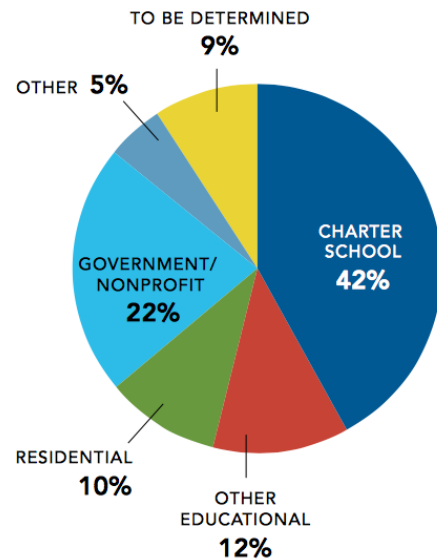


Figure 3: New uses for school district properties in 12 cities: 2005-2012; Source: Pew Charitable Trust

Chicago has shifted from a policy that almost explicitly reserved empty school properties for charter schools to one that strictly prohibits the practice. On the other hand, laws in Georgia require school districts to allow charter school operators to bid first on closed school buildings. Georgia law also “requires districts to offer surplus properties to charter schools at no rental fee” (Pew Charitable Trust, 2013). Charter schools, therefore, are currently the most common new use of closed school properties.

### Underperformance

The last decade has seen a great deal of schools close due to poor economic performance. According to No Child Left Behind Act requirements, schools that chronically failed to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) were shuttered. The U.S. has a long history of educational inequality that has proven challenging to overcome. It is no mystery then that schools populated by predominantly black, poor children, with high number of special educational needs, failed to reach 100% proficiency by the 2013-2014 school year as mandated by NCLB.

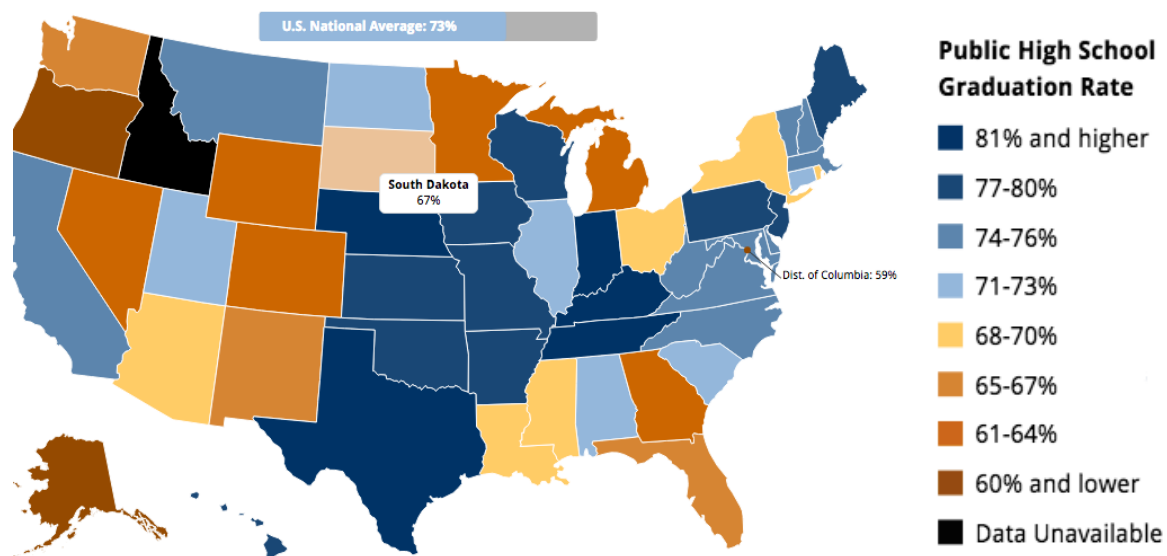


Figure 4: Public high school graduation rates of economically disadvantaged students 2012-2013; Source: Education Weekly



The result was a scramble on the part of local school districts to close, relocate, rename, and rebrand schools that threatened to cut Title I funds. Title I is the largest federal funding source for education to local school districts and states. These funds are used for educational programs for disadvantaged children (Klein, 2016).

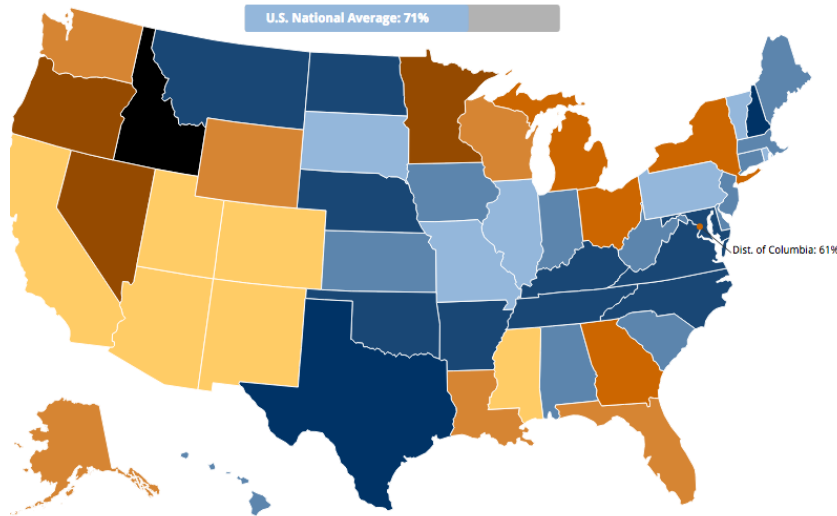


Figure 5: Public high school graduation rates of black students 2012-2013; Source: Education Weekly

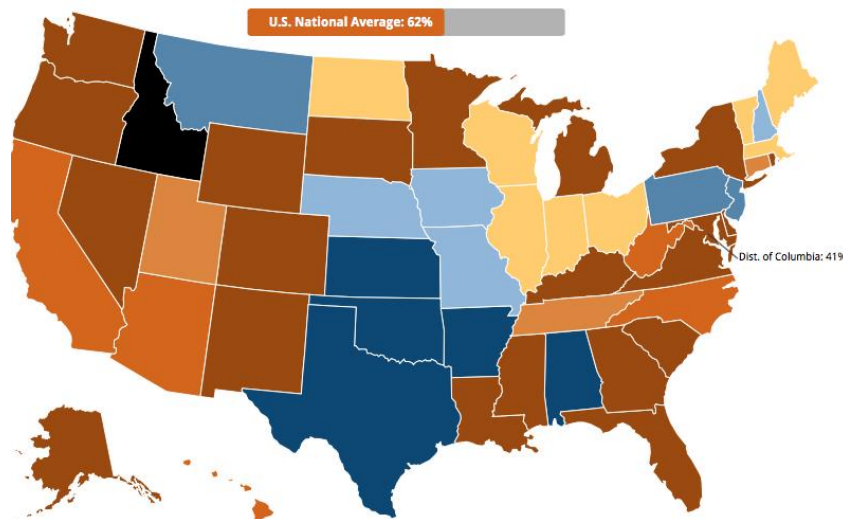


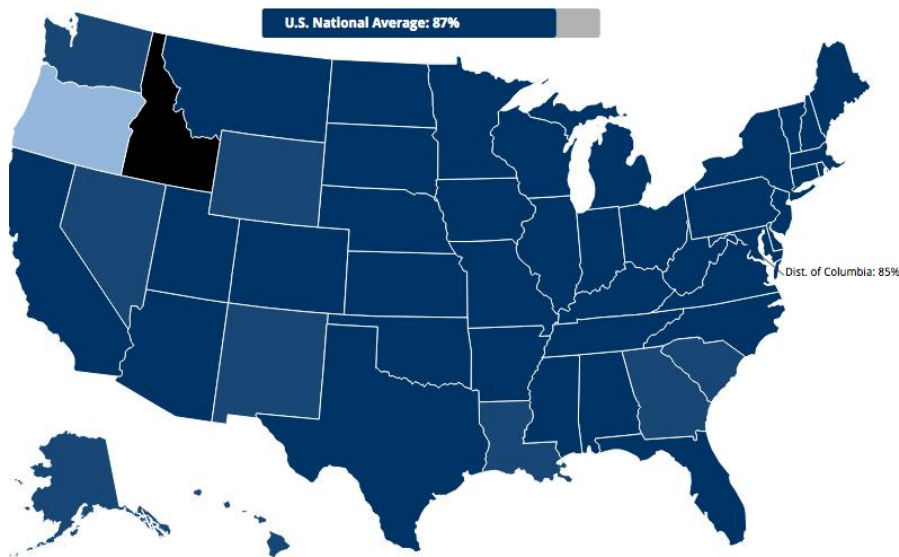
Figure 6: Public high school graduation rates of students with disabilities 2012-2013; Source: Education Weekly

National graduation data for the 2012-2013 school year, reported by the U.S. Department of Education and published by Education Week in 2015, shows the persistent gap between historically disadvantaged racial and ethnic groups and their white and Asian counterparts. The data was collected from each state, except Idaho using a relatively new method called Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rates (ACGR).

These graduation rates are an indication of the realities in primary and secondary schools across the country that cause some schools to be shuttered due to their specific subgroups not

meeting national reform standards.

They shed light on why schools are closed for underperforming, and why these closures are seen at a disproportionate rate in primarily poor, minority communities.



**Figure 7: Public high school graduation rates of white students 2012-2013; Source: Education Weekly**

## Impact

Little is known about the impact of school closings on communities. Most research has focused on their impact on student performance, and other organizations have studied surplus school properties. It has been found that closing a school can make student performance suffer temporarily, and that most students who are moved do not have better educational outcomes because they tend to be sent to schools that are themselves underperforming. It has also been found that closing schools is not very cost effective. School districts tend to underestimate the challenges of managing and finding a good use for these properties while overestimating the financial gains.

### Impact on students

Studies have shown that the majority of school closures or consolidations, the merging of two or more schools into one site in order to save money, is most common in low-income, high minority neighborhoods. The research on how school closings impact students is plentiful and most indicate that they fail to boost student performance.

The University of Chicago's Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) studied the impact of Chicago's traditional school closings on student performance. The study noted that the city of Chicago closed 47 schools in 2013 alone. They found that students are most negatively impacted during the year in which the future closing is announced. They also found that students relocated due to the closing of their underperforming school did no better or worse after two years than students in similar schools that are not closed. In other words, the narrative that closing underperforming schools is beneficial to student success is a myth. They also found that school closures affected summer school and made students more transient. Most importantly, they found that academic outcomes were dependent on the academic success of the receiving schools, which tended to be an issue since only 6 percent of students were sent to schools that performed better than the one just closed (de la Torre et al.). Results from studies such as this one prompted school officials in Chicago to ensure that students who are relocated are sent to better performing schools.

Larson's 2014 findings were similar. He reported that the shock of the school closure lowered student's GPA and attendance, but that students were able to bounce back over time. He noted, however, that for many students, high school ended before the effects were completely reversed and added that in the long-run, school closures lowered the probability of high school graduation and college attendance.

### Surplus Properties

The closing of a school that has been part of a community for sometimes decades will inevitably cause change. Perhaps the biggest driver of this change comes from how the

property is used after the closure. In recent years, the trend has been to turn the buildings over to charter schools, housing developers or community groups. Each one of these uses affect the immediate neighborhoods in different ways. Very often, however, selling or leasing these properties is more challenging than anticipated. All too often, buildings sit vacant for decades at a time. These buildings can become eyesores that attract criminal activity and become symbols of neighborhood decline. “Decisions that school districts make about the future of closed buildings have lasting impact on the future of their cities, as well as the future of their school systems.” (Pew Charitable Trust, 2013)

Often times, districts sell these properties for far less than they are worth, further aggravating the situation. Sale prices for most shuttered schools have been between \$200,000 and \$1 million; frequently well below initial projections. In Cincinnati, 11 buildings and one vacant parcel were sold at auction for a total of \$3.5 million in 2012; a price well below the official valuation (Pew Charitable Trust, 2013). In declining cities, property values are essentially zero considering the high cost of needed renovations or demolition.

Location of a property is key in determining the likelihood that it will have reuse value and thus not sit empty. Schools that were located in neighborhood streets with little to no traffic and not located on commercial corridors tend to sit empty longer even if they are in good condition. The fact that many of these properties are located in declining neighborhoods, which tend to be losing population, makes the selling of the property that much more unlikely. (Samuels, 2011)

Between the years 2005 and 2012, the Detroit School District sold, leased or repurposed 63 school buildings. By the end of 2012, the district also had 124 properties that stood empty, sometimes for decades. For Atlanta, these numbers are 22 and 17 respectively.

### SCHOOL DISTRICT PROPERTIES ON THE MARKET: END OF 2012

*In some cases, these properties have stood empty for a decade or more. Others were declared surplus only in the last few years.*

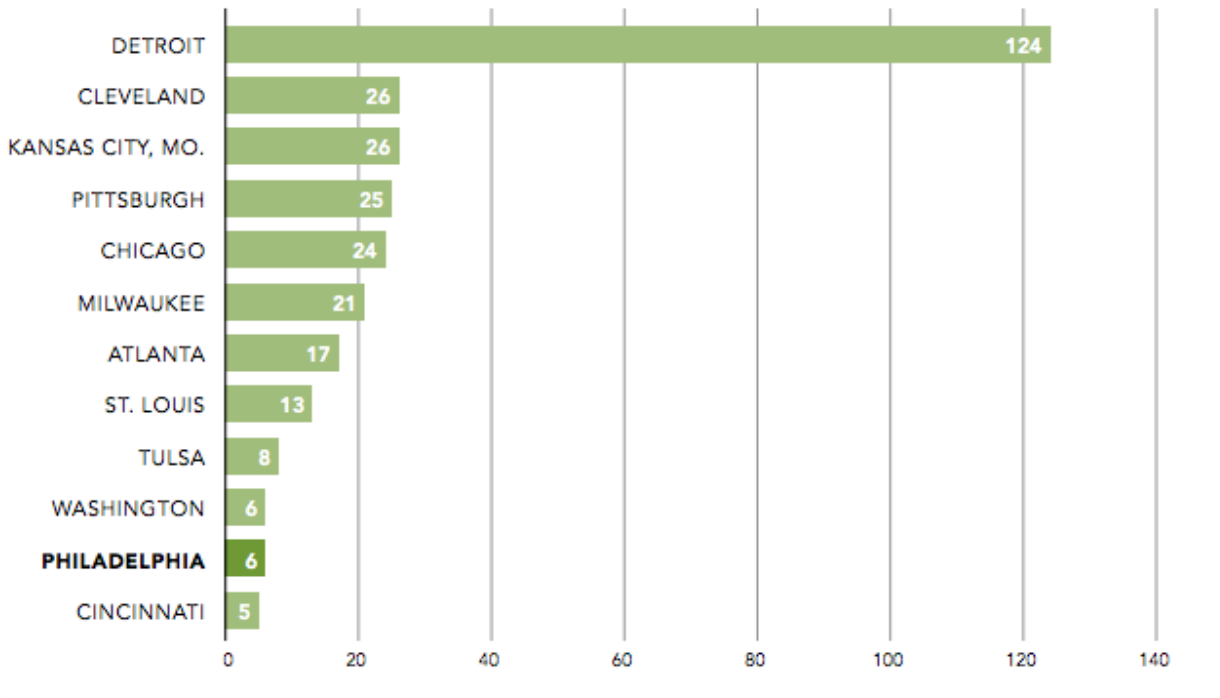


Figure 8: School district properties on the market for 12 US cities 2012; Source: Pew Charitable Trust

### Georgia Educational Context

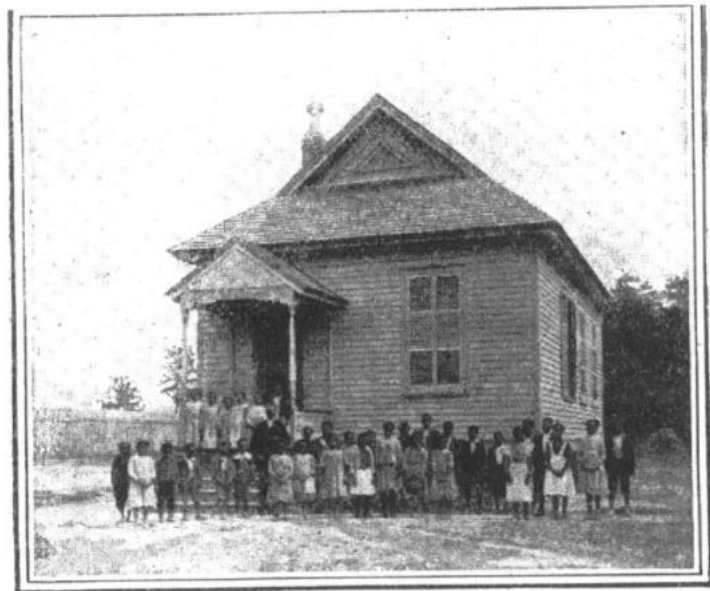
As of 2015, the state of Georgia serves more than 7.5 million students in over 2,200 public schools (Georgia Department of Education). The state received a state education score of C-, 71.9, according to the annual report published by Education Week, Quality Counts. It was ranked 34th in the nation, using a ranking grading system that takes into account overall student chance of success, K-12 achievement, and school finances (Quality Counts, 2016). In 2015, the state graduated 78.8 percent of its students (Tagami, 2015), lagging slightly behind the national rate of 81 percent.

Public schools in Georgia date back to 1777 when they were authorized by the state constitution, which stated that schools were to be built in each county on the state's expense. Despite growth in the number of schools built by the state between the Revolutionary war and the Civil War, education was not widely available as these

schools required tuition in order to operate, and it was illegal to educate African Americans in the state of Georgia during that time. Beginning in 1822, the state legislature approved the “poor student fund,” a modest assistance for children of poor families that helped them attain a maximum of three years of basic education (Jones, 2014).

After the Civil War, funding for public schools fell on local governments, schools expanded on the local level, and African American children had the legal right to education for the first time. By the turn of the twentieth century, Georgia passed a series of laws giving counties the right to tax property for school funding, and in 1919 the state school system was expanded to include high schools, as it had only included elementary schools and colleges until then.

Education for African Americans remained scarce and severely underfunded. Black children were educated in church basements or one-room schoolhouses funded by the black community. Black leaders formed the Georgia Educational Association in an effort raise funds, establish, and supervise schools. The organization sustained two-thirds of the African American schools in Georgia, which numbered almost 100 by 1867 (US Department of Interior, n. d). In the 1920’s, northern philanthropists, most notably the Rosenwald Fund, led efforts to reform black education in the South. During the next two decades, the Rosenwald Fund assisted in the building of 259 schools in 103 counties across the state (Moffson, 2010).



NEGRO RURAL SCHOOL, BIBB COUNTY, GEORGIA.

**Figure 9: Rural school for black children in Bibb County, GA, date unknown; Source: United States Public of Interior**

In 1949, Governor Herman Talmadge began the Minimum Foundation Program for Education, which pushed the state's first sales tax that helped fund about 1,200 new schools in Georgia between 1952 and 1962. The new education funding enabled the state to build roughly 500 modern schools for African Americans that became known as equalizing schools. These schools were built after the *Brown vs. Board of education* decision in an effort to avoid school integration by showing that the state had a successful “separate but equal” educational system; a model that the state had ignored the first half of the century. “Many communities built new schools for African- American students in an effort to appease the black community. The city of Athens went so far as to build two new high schools – one for white students in 1952, and one for African- American students in 1956.” (US Department of the Interior, n. d.).



*Illustration 26. Plan and photograph of McCoy Hill School in Americus, a small town in south Georgia. Designed by Stevens and Wilkinson, and part of the “separate but equal” efforts of Georgia to avoid integration, this school was built for African-American children in 1956. Apparently the school housed both primary and secondary students as the wing on the south is labeled “primary classrooms.” Pictures and plan from *Selected Works of Stevens and Wilkinson*, pp. 104-107.*

Figure 11: School built in 1956 for black students in Americus, GA; Source: US Department of Interior

For two decades, black communities grew around newly built schools, that although still underfunded compared to their white counterparts, provided these communities with a strong sense of pride and cohesion. These schools became the center of their communities, as sports, extracurricular activities, and large auditoriums for gatherings were woven into the fabric of everyday life. Schools were often open for 18 hours a day, as many members of the community used the campuses. These schools also helped

develop a black middle class, as teachers and principals were some of the highest and best-paid positions for African Americans at the time (Moffson, 2010).

After the Brown decision, southern states passed hundreds of laws to prevent the integration of their schools. But by 1959, after a U.S. District Court judge ruled that Atlanta's segregated public school system was unconstitutional, it became clear to the state of Georgia that resistance and newly built black schools were not going to prevent racial integration.

Pupil Placement Laws were passed in an effort to ward off confrontation between the public and the federal authority. The laws stated that black parents could apply to have their children attend white schools by going to city hall and filing a public request. Names and addresses of these families were made public and academic and psychological tests of the children were required to determine their fitness for transfer to a white school (McCall, 1984). On August of 1961, four white high schools in Atlanta were to be desegregated after 9 out of 130 applicants were approved. Mayor Hartsfield worked hard to maintain the public relations narrative that Atlanta was a "city too busy to hate". In September of 1961, Time Magazine described the occasion as the "smoothest token school integration ever seen in the Deep South". Atlanta became the first southern city to "integrate" peacefully although many white families quietly moved out of the city rather than to face integrated public schools.

By the mid-1960s several schools that had been historically white, became predominantly black schools, as white families withdrew their children. Kirkwood Elementary became an all-black school on its first day of integration in January of 1965 when the school's white faculty and students transferred to area white schools. In 1973, the Atlanta Public School leadership, the federal district court, and community leaders agreed that racial integration of the school system was not possible because there were simply not enough white students left in the system (as cited in Moffson, 2010).



Across Georgia, many black schools closed rather than to have white children travel across town to attend formerly black schools even if these schools were newer and in better condition than those remaining open. Black high schools were reduced to middle schools or closed altogether in favor of white high schools. The schools that had been built in an effort to fend off racial integration became surplus buildings, many of which sat empty for decades negatively affecting black communities. The closures also negatively affected black communities by debilitating their middle class populations primarily made up of black educators. Their relatively high incomes, which had thus far supported local business and churches, significantly diminished as fewer black schools meant fewer employment opportunities.

### Atlanta Public Schools

The Atlanta Public School district was established in 1872 when it opened three grammar schools and two high schools. Today, it educates approximately 51,000 students, three quarters of which are African American. APS faces significant challenges, as it lags well behind average on state tests and graduation rates, and educates a primarily poor population. Over 77 percent of students attending the district's 97 schools are eligible for free or reduced lunch under the National Lunch Program (ATL, 2016).

APS is currently implementing significant changes led by recently appointed superintendent, Meria Carstarphen. The Atlanta school district is actively trying to shed its reputation after being in the national spotlight for one of the country's biggest cheating scandals (Maxwell, 2014). Today, the district is focusing on change, as it braces itself for what may be a state takeover of several of its underperforming schools. Georgia's proposed Opportunity School District (OSD) legislation, up for a vote on November 2016, would allow the state to take over "persistently failing" schools and manage them under a state educational district, share governance with current administrators, shut them down, or convert them to charter schools. As of May 3, 2016, the state of Georgia had 23 Atlanta Public Schools on its OSD list (Georgia Government, 2016).

According to Carstarphen, measures to avoid the possible takeover have included the closure and consolidation of several schools, contracts with charter organizations, and the district's structural shift to a charter school system. This appears to be a natural move, as the state of Georgia encourages charter schools. In Atlanta alone, enrollment in charter schools rose by 135% within the years 2005 and 2011. (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2015)

As of July 1, 2016, Atlanta's schools are governed the same as many of its local charter schools. Under this new governing charter system, all previously traditional schools in the district become charter schools for the next five years. Local school governance teams (LSGT) will govern them. In Atlanta, these teams are called GO Teams. GO Teams are comprised of nine voting members for elementary and middle schools and 10 members for high schools, as these include one high school student. LSGTs include a principal, who is a nonvoting member, three parents or guardians elected by parents, three nonsupervisory instructional staff members elected by staff, two community members recommended by the principal and ratified by the LSGT, and a Swing Vote, recruited by the principal or LSGT members and ratified by the LSGT. High school GO Teams also include a student nominated by the LSGT (APS, 2016).

Atlanta has a long history of school closures although few records are kept on the subject. The financial drain caused by white residents leaving the city and the construction of local highways took a toll on several Atlanta schools. Although many of them reopened as new schools, other historically significant schools were torn down. Grant Park School, which once stood at 400 Boulevard, is today part of I-20. The site of Howell Elementary is now a shopping center. Lee Street School and Luckie Street School are now parking lots (Rhea, 2013). Other city schools still stand, although they stand abandoned. English Avenue School and the beautiful Adair Park School are just two examples.

## Indicators of Strong Communities

In order to determine if there exists a correlation between school closures or instability due to consolidations and the success of local communities, it was important to define a strong community. According to Stimson, Western, Baum and Gellecum (2003), the term “community” can be constructed in terms of a ‘community of location’ or a ‘community of interest’. In the case of this study, I decided to define community in terms of location with the assumption that the residents within proximity of schools, who utilize the service provided by the school, would share a common interest.

Strong communities are often defined as resilient and healthy. Although these descriptors are different, I found that there was a significant overlap of the characteristics used to define them. And in circumstances where the characteristics of a strong community are missing, members of that community are less able to overcome the challenges of constant change and have less capacity to cope with the pressures that lead to economic, family, and social breakdown.

The term “resilient” is most commonly used when discussing a community’s ability to bounce back from a natural disaster. Mayunga defined resilience as ‘the capacity or ability of a community to anticipate, prepare for and respond to, and recover quickly from impacts of disaster’ (as cited in da Silva et al. 2011). The closure of a neighborhood school is not being described as a disaster in this report; however, the characteristics of a community that define it as resilient are worth noting.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Society found that the characteristics of a safe and resilient community are (1) knowledge and health: the ability to assess, manage and monitor risks; (2) organization: the capacity to identify problems, establish priorities and act; (3) connections: relationships with external actors who provide a wider supportive environment, and supply goods and services when needed; (4) infrastructure and services: strong housing, transport, power, etc. and the ability to maintain these; (5) economic opportunities: employment opportunities, income and financial services; and (6) natural resources: physical, natural, financial,

social and human, over which the community has full ownership and control (da Silva et al. 2011).

When measuring the strength and social capital of communities, Stimson et al. (2003) chose similar indicators. They focused on four domains, which included (1) natural capital; (2) produced economic capital; (3) human capital, and (4) social and institutional capital. To assess natural capital, they measured the condition of the environment with gross population density and pressures on the environment by looking at population, household growth and in-migration. To measure produced economic capital, they used indicators such as home ownership, household income, medical services, and households without a motor vehicle, for example. In addition, to measure human capital, school dropout rates as well as the size and quality of the labor force were used.

The Atlanta Neighborhood Quality of Life & Health Project by the Center of Geographic Information Systems at Georgia Tech also uses a number of similar indicators when creating its community indexes for the city's Neighborhood Planning Units (NQOL, 2016).

## Data Collection

This research into the effects of closures of traditional neighborhood schools on local communities is based on primary as well as secondary data sources. A broad-range literature review provided a foundation for the study and an understanding of the wider context. There are several goals to accomplish through this research, data collection, and analysis. One of the goals is to compile a comprehensive record of historical school closures in the Atlanta Public School System, as this data is currently unavailable. Other goals include the identification of clear indicators of what constitutes a strong community and the collection of data on said indicators. Lastly, this research seeks to analyze this data to see if there is a correlation between community strength and instability of traditional public schools.

## School Closures

Data for national school closings were available as far back as 1995 and were retrieved from sources such as the National Center for Education Statistics. Data for school closures in Atlanta required a more ambitious search, as the Atlanta School District and the Georgia Department of Education are not currently keeping these records. Both agencies were unable to provide school closure data.

The Facilities Department at APS provided me with a list of properties that are being maintained, leased, or put up for sale, as well as a list of sold properties. The APS facilities lists went back as far as 1973. This information was crosschecked using a school data collection list compiled by Dr. Michael Campbell and Gerald Williams from the Facilities Services Unit of the Georgia Department of Education. The data they shared contained a list of Atlanta Public Schools dating back to 2008. Research was done to track the fate of closed school properties, their locations, and approximate closure dates. Additional resources used to compile a closed schools list included newspaper articles, historical documents, and Google Maps. Although much care was taken to compile a reliable set of closed schools, the data is incomplete and further research to document the many school closures in the city of Atlanta is encouraged. This research identified 93 school closures. It also separated closures by the properties' fate. Categories included schools that were closed and later replaced by other traditional public school entities, schools that closed whose properties were either left empty, demolished, or are leased for various purposes including charter schools, and properties that were sold to non-educational related entities such as housing developers.

I found that in many instances, high schools became middle schools, middle schools became elementary schools and vice versa. I also found that names often abruptly changed without apparent notice from the press, particularly those of schools that were involved in the cheating scandal. For example, Walter Leonard Parks Middle School, a school heavily involved in the cheating scandal was renamed Sylvan Hill after merging with another middle school and is currently being used as the temporary site of L.O.

Kimberly Elementary, all within a five-year span. This type of rapid change made it challenging to track the fate of many Atlanta schools.

### Communities Chosen for the Study

Atlanta Neighborhood Planning Units (NPU) were chosen for this study, as they are a good definition of “community” within the Atlanta context. Atlanta is already broken up into twenty-five areas that are represented by citizen advisory councils which assess the state of their community and make recommendations to the Atlanta local government. Each NPU is a collection of neighborhoods. NPUs have been in place since 1974 to participate in the city’s Comprehensive Development Plan and are easily recognizable by city officials, planners, and residents alike (City of Atlanta, 2016). There is a wealth of data available at the NPU level thanks to organizations such as the Westside Community Alliance and its Data Dashboard, as well as Atlanta’s Neighborhood Quality of Life & Health Project by Georgia Tech’s Center for Geographic Information Systems in the College of Architecture. For a project such as this, NPUs are great because they best highlight a community’s character, its challenges and assets, as well as the community’s cohesiveness and ability to work together in response to changes.

Mapping of the known school closures showed the distribution of these schools across the Atlanta Public School System. The schools were also distributed by NPU to further narrow down their impact. In an effort to measure community strength and its possible relationship with the stability of its traditional public schools, research was conducted on nine of the city’s 25 NPUs. Three NPUs that showed the least disturbance of its traditional schools were chosen. Minimal disturbance was defined as either a low number of shuttered schools, or by the function of closed school properties after said school closures. There is acknowledgment of disturbance whenever a school is closed, particularly to its students and staff, but this disturbance is lessened when the property is refurbished and used as another traditional public school. These three communities included NPUs A, F, and H. The three NPUs that experienced the most traditional school turnover or school shutdowns were M, J, and W. And lastly, the three NPUs that

make up the Westside Community, K, L, and T, were analyzed as well for a number of reasons.

Two of the three NPUs found to have had little interruption in their public primary and secondary schools shared similar traits. NPU A is a community located in the northernmost part of the city. It is made up of 11 distinct neighborhoods such as Chastain Park, Pleasant Hill, and Randall Mill. Over 90% percent of its residents are white and their median income is well above that of the Atlanta area's (WCA, 2016). NPU F, located on the far east side of the city of Atlanta is made up of well-known neighborhoods such as Virginia Highlands, Atkins Park and Lenox Park. It has a similar racial make up to NPU A, as it is comprised of 83% white residents. These are significant numbers in a city that is made up of 60% black residents (WCA, 2016). NPU H, however, also found to have experienced little public school disruption, differed significantly from the two others. NPU H is primarily populated by black residents; about 92 percent in 2014. It is located in the far west side of Atlanta and is made up of neighborhoods such as Boulder Park, Carroll Heights and Baker Hill (WCA. 2016).

The Neighborhood Planning Units M, J, and W all experienced a high number of school closures. NPU M is made up of the Sweet Auburn, Old Fourth Ward, Castleberry Hill and Downtown neighborhoods. This area, which was made up of primarily black residents just a decade ago, is experiencing a quick shift in population as living in city centers has become trendy. The Old Fourth Ward alone has received a drastic makeover since the introduction of the Beltline. As of 2014, African Americans made up a little over 50 percent of the population in the area.

NPU J, located on the west side of the city, is primarily populated by African American residents, and it includes the West Lake, Center Hill, and Grove Park neighborhoods. NPU W is located on the east side of the city and it is made up of neighborhoods that have gone through significant transformations such as Grant Park, Oakland, and East Atlanta. A population shift has also been experienced this NPU where black residents made up about 40 percent of its population in 2014 (WCA, 2016).

The last three NPUs, K, L, and T, make up the Westside Community in Atlanta. Research shows that many Atlanta communities saw a great number of their traditional schools closed only to be replaced by new underperforming schools, and there are many communities that are poor and struggle to sustain. For this research, however, I found it best to narrow down my focus in an effort to best illustrate the state of the community, its school instability, and how these may be connected. The Westside community was selected particularly because there is a lot of data available, as it has been studied in depth by local schools and organizations, and its residents were welcoming of my interest in their schools and their community.

Located in the heart of Atlanta, the Westside community boasts a rich history. It is home to Atlanta's first African American High School, Booker T. Washington High School, which opened in 1924. It was the largest Black high school in the United States by 1942, with an enrollment of 4,200 students (APS, 2016). Alumni of this community's public schools include Martin Luther King Jr. and "Able" Mable Thomas.

Today, the Westside community struggles with a high number of blighted homes, drug abuse, high crime, extremely low property prices and a high number of failing schools. This is incomprehensible because the area has a variety of educational, financial and natural resources that should make it a successful community. These include the Coca Cola and Chick Filet corporations as well as the new Falcon's stadium. Quality higher educational institutions such as Georgia Tech and Historically Black Colleges such as Spellman and Morris Brown College also surround the area. Neighborhoods in the Westside include Vine City, English Avenue, the West End, Bankhead and Washington Park (WCA, 2016).

### Indicators of Community Strength

Although researchers have different approaches when identifying strong communities, there are some commonalities among their measures. Safety, access to affordable housing, strong educational opportunities, employment, access to healthcare and food,



as well as the means to reach these essentials are, in some way or another, recurring themes. My goal is to use definitions of strong communities and the identification of suitable measures to produce a list of measurable indicators that assess a community's vitality. For the purpose of having this topic be further analyzed in the future, I thought it important to choose data that is accessible to the general public. I also wanted data that is comparable among neighborhoods and data that is easily understood.

Due to the limitations of this report, a shorter yet comprehensive list of indicators is utilized. The indicators of community strength chosen for this project are median income, home ownership rates, property vacancy rates, employment rates, educational attainment, access to health insurance and community diversity. Other vital community health indicators such as crime rates and transportation will be noted using the work of the Atlanta's Neighborhood Quality of Life and Health Project.

Median income is useful because it reflects the economic resources available to individuals, families and households within a community. This is important because it is a good indicator of how the local community has bounced back from previous economic recessions. Home ownership rates are an important measure as home ownership represents a significant, if not the most significant asset of households. Employment rates measure economic stability and the prospects of future investments in the community.

Access to quality healthcare and quality food measure the general health of a community's population. Educational attainment is a good indicator of the quality of the local school system, and it is a good predictor of the educational success of children currently navigating the system. Access to transportation gives us an idea of how people in the community can reach vital necessities such as employment, healthcare, food and adequate education for children, particularly with the expansion of charter schools, which rarely provide bussing.

## Results

The research identified approximately 93 schools that have been closed during the public school district's history. Of these 93 identified school closures, 21 were reused as traditional public schools. The other 72 school properties remained empty, were eventually demolished, were leased out by the school district for a variety of functions, or were sold. The map below shows the distribution of such schools and the current status of the property.

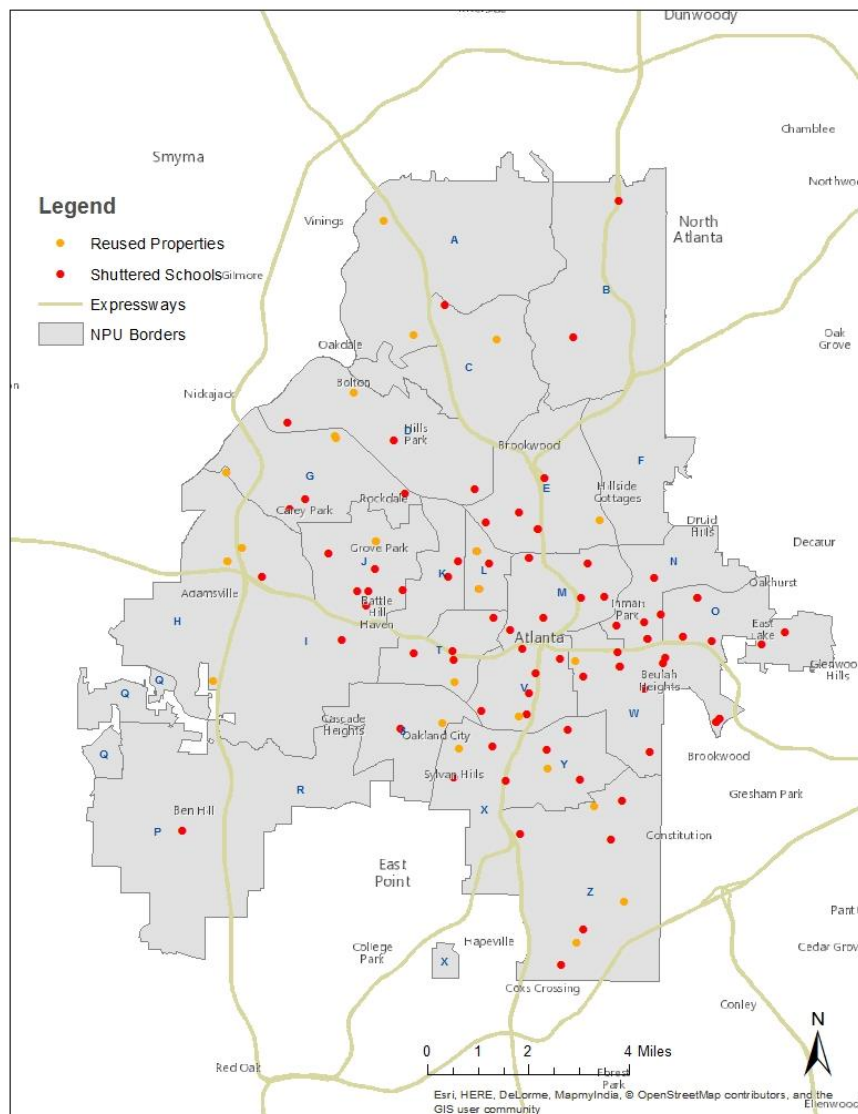


Figure 12: Shuttered and reused schools in the Atlanta Public School System

Some of the schools featured in the map were closed as early as 1947. Commercial High School, for example, which was located on 138 Prior Street and built circa 1888 is today the Superior Court of Fulton County located in NPU M. Adair Park Elementary, which is highlighted on the cover of this report, is located on Catherine St. in NPU V and has sat abandoned for over forty years. The school was built in 1912 and is currently sited in the 2001 and 2005 Most Endangered Historic Places, according to the Atlanta Preservation Center. What could be a historic asset to the community has sat as an eyesore since 1972 and is now in the middle of a property battle between APS and the City of Atlanta who once ran the public schools and still holds the deed (Leslie, 2015).

Other schools on the list include John F. Kennedy Middle School from NPU L in the Westside community which consolidated with Brown Middle School in 2015. The Kennedy Property will be used during the 2016-2017 school year by the new Hollis Innovation Academy, previously called Bethune Academy and closed in May of 2016. Such is the rapid closure of schools that the current school GIS file downloaded from the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) had to be updated for this project.

The data also showed that most school closures took place in high poverty areas. The 72 properties that ceased to function as traditional public schools were layered over the ARC's Low Poverty Index file. The poverty index captures the intensity of poverty at the census tract level. It uses data from family poverty rates and public assistance such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). The values in the index are inverted and percentile ranked nationally, where a score of 100 represents no exposure to poverty in a neighborhood (ARC, 2016).

Light colored areas indicate the city's high poverty areas and show a higher number of shuttered schools. The data also showed that dark colored census tracts, primarily in the northern parts of the city that are inhabited by wealthier residents, experienced far less interruption of their public educational facilities.

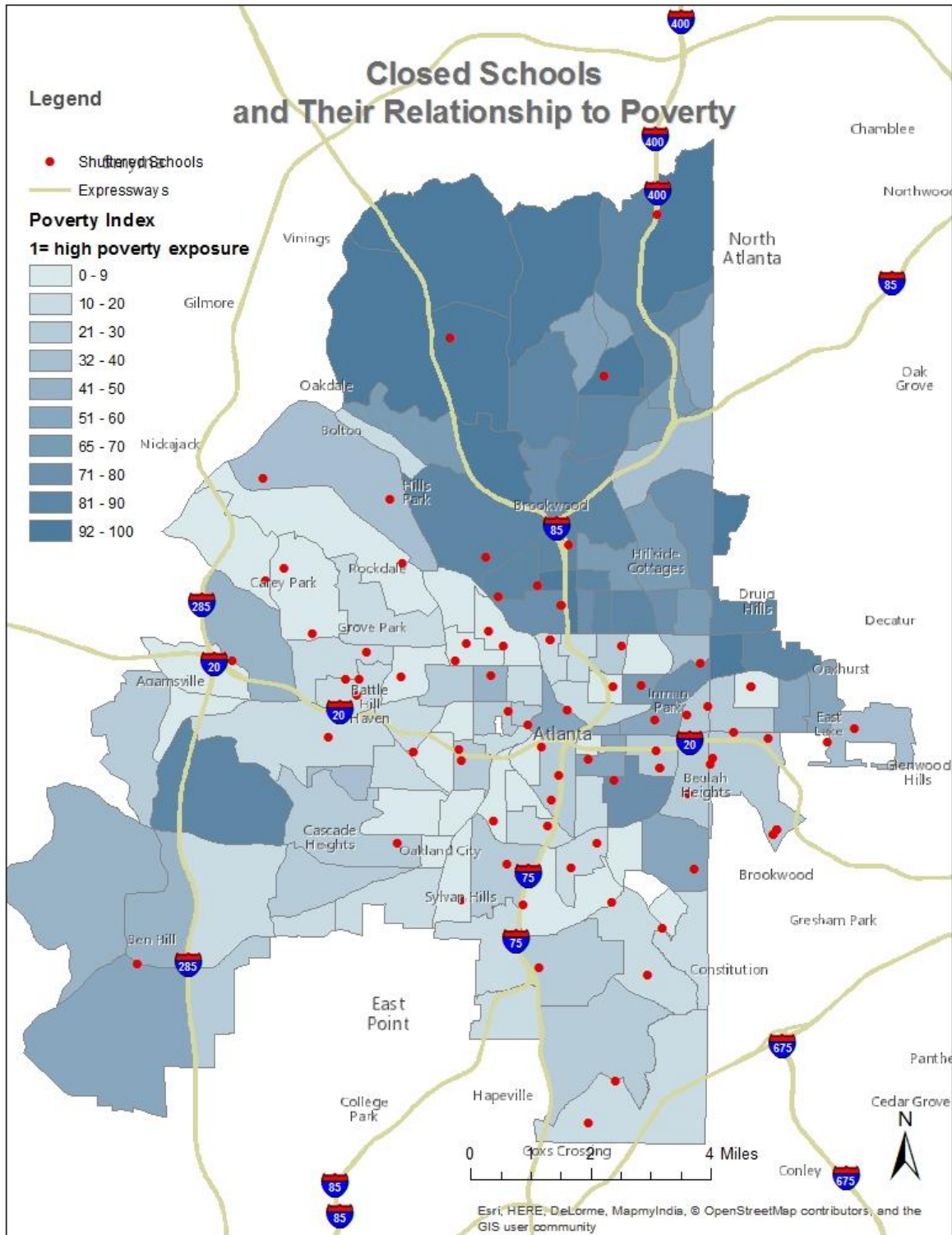


Figure 13: Closed school properties and their location’s relationship with poverty.

The 72 permanent school closures were also superimposed over Atlanta’s Neighborhood Planning Units to better localize the research of their impact on communities. The data shows that seven out of the 25 NPUs experienced five or more traditional public school shut downs. These are properties that were not reopened as a traditional public school after a school closure. Five of the NPUs had no shuttered schools. Some did experience school closures but all properties are currently being reused as traditional public schools. It should be noted that NPU Q showed no record of closings but also has no current public primary and secondary schools within its boundaries.

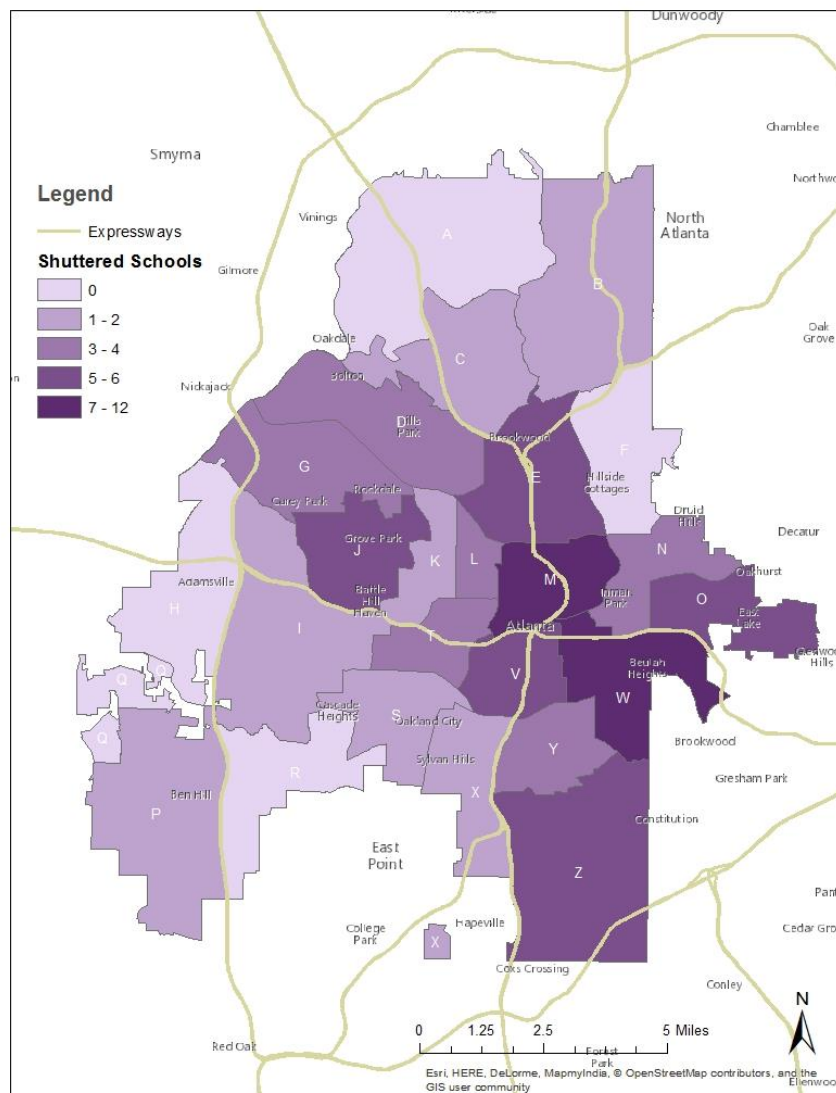


Figure 14: Number of schools closed per Atlanta Neighborhood Planning Unit

## Community Comparison

Several strength indicators were used to compare the aforementioned Neighborhood Planning Units in an effort to see if school closures impact communities. NPUs A, F, and H, color coded in blue in most graphs, experienced low traditional public school disruptions. NPUs J, M, and W, which were color coded in red, experienced the highest number of school closures and only a few of the properties were used to continue traditional public education. The Westside NPUs appear in green and represent my focus community.

The graphs below show the shift in black population throughout the last 65 years. In all but NPUs A and F, two of the least disturbed by school closures, the black portion of the population rose dramatically as white families fled the city toward the suburbs during the 60s and 70s. It should also be noted that the black population actually dropped in the two aforementioned NPUs during that same time period.

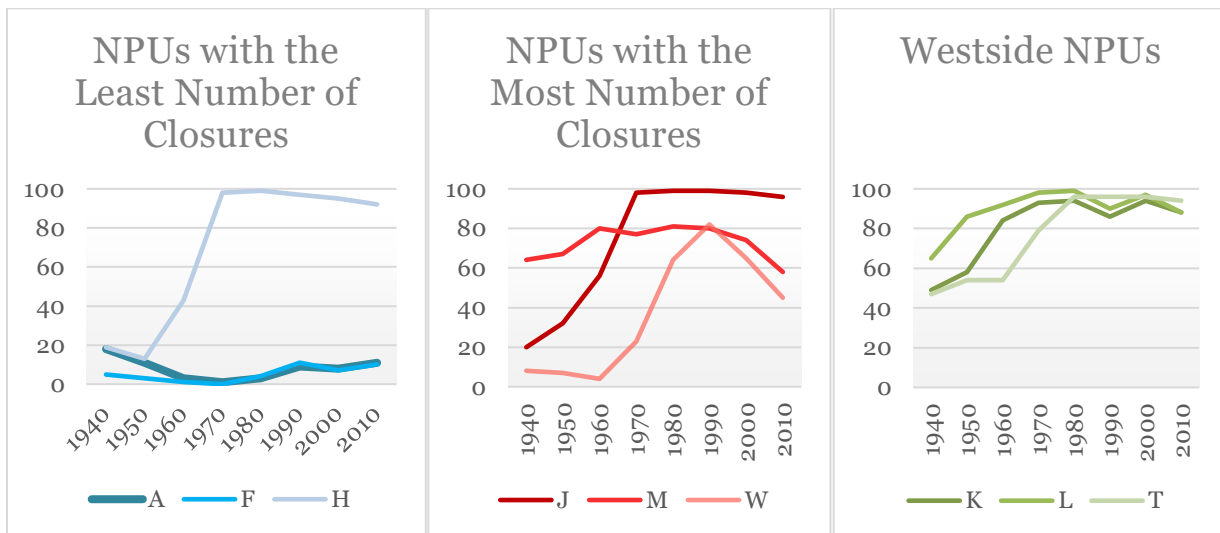


Figure 15: Black population in featured NPUs, 1940-2010; Source: WCA Data Dashboard

Almost a quarter of students in the city of Atlanta attend private institutions for their primary and secondary education. This number is higher in three of the nine NPUs studied. The graph shows the percentage of students in each one of the NPUs that relies on the public system for their education. It should be noted that two of the three least

affected NPUs rely less on public education than the city average, while those most affected NPUs use the public system most.

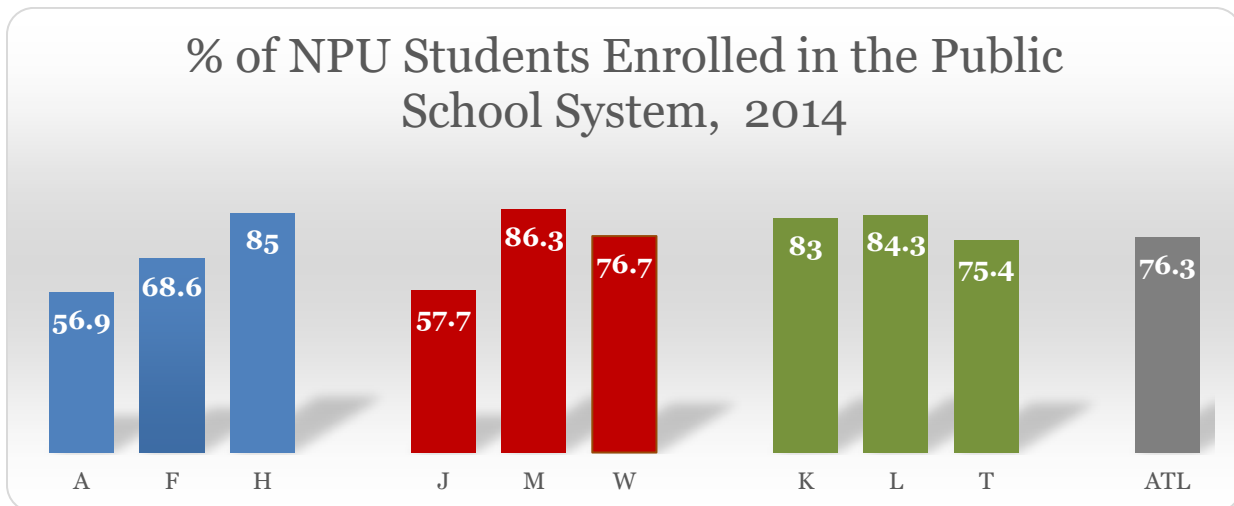


Figure 16: Percentage of NPU students enrolled in APS; Source: WCA Data Dashboard

According to the collected data, NPU H experienced only two school closures both of which were reused as traditional public schools. This NPU also currently has a large number of schools compared to the other NPUs. It currently has six traditional public schools within its community, a number only matched by NPU Z. Despite NPU H being one of the least disturbed by school closures, it's ranked 23rd in Atlanta's Neighborhood Quality of Life & Health Index (NQOL) and Low on their Socioeconomic Index (SEC).

The research found two schools that were closed in NPU A, but both are currently being used as traditional public schools. No schools were found to have been closed in NPU F, and the community currently counts with two traditional public schools and one private school. NPU F is one of seven NPUs to be ranked as High in SEC index, it is number one on its NQOL ranking, and second in its Neighborhood Health (NH) Index.

In contrast, Neighborhood Planning Unit J saw six shuttered schools and one closure that resulted in a traditional school reuse. Today, this NPU has a total of three traditional schools and no private primary or secondary institutions. NPU M, had five of

its schools closed indefinitely and one that was reused. Today, NPU M has only one traditional public school within its boundaries and three private schools. NPU W, the most effected, has seen ten of its public schools close and only one was reused as a traditional school.

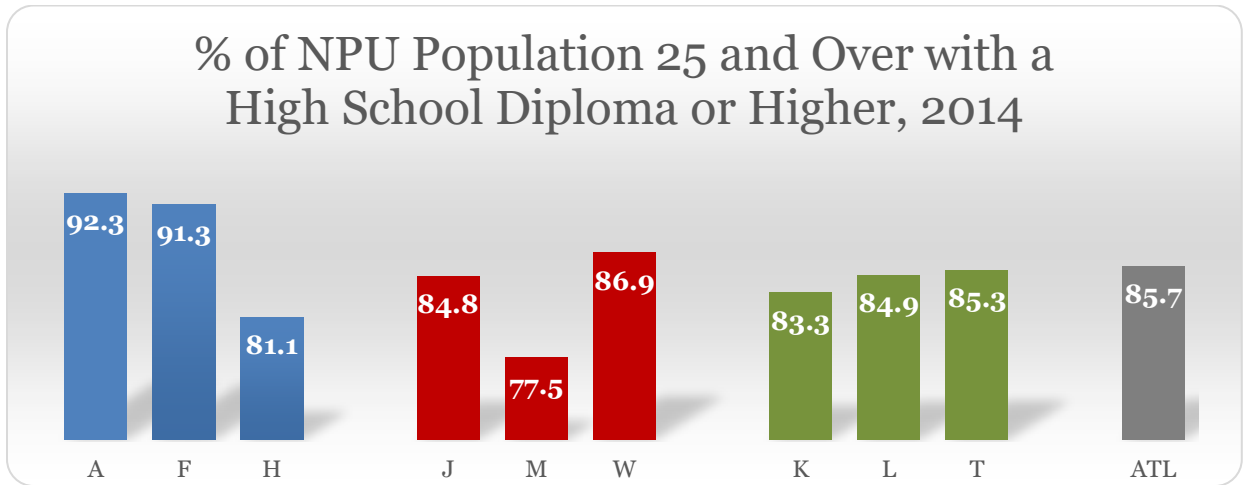


Figure 17: Percentage of NPU population 25 and over with a high school diploma or higher, 2014; Source: WCA Data Dashboard

The high school graduation graph shows an inverse relationship between an NPUs reliance on public institutions that experience high closure rates and its graduation rates. One might conclude that closing schools due to underperformance fails to meet to its goal of bettering education for students.

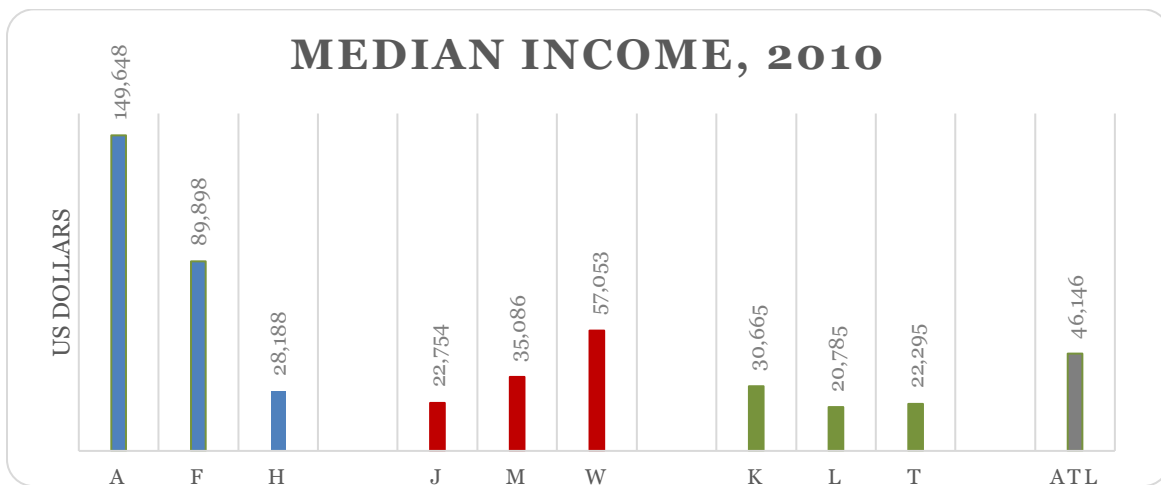


Figure 18: Median Income in featured NPUs, 2010; Source: Atlanta’s Neighborhood Quality of Life & Health Project



Graduation rates in all nine NPUs studied closely mirrored the resident's earning potential, as well as other key indicators of a strong community such as the stability of home ownership, strong family units, and access to healthcare. The Socioeconomic Index (SEC), which measures unemployment rates, attainment of a Bachelor's degree, poverty rates, and median income, ranked five out of the nine NPUs as having a Low SEC. These include NPUs H, J, and all three of the Westside NPUs. Only A and F were ranked High according to the Socioeconomic Index.

Research tells us that "students who are in stable communities and in higher income families [tend to] have better educational success later on" (Frohlich, 2015). This relationship between family income and educational success is extremely complex, but one can see how a child that has rich exposure to the world and enriching activities due to economic freedom, is able to make better connections when being exposed to curricula in a classroom.

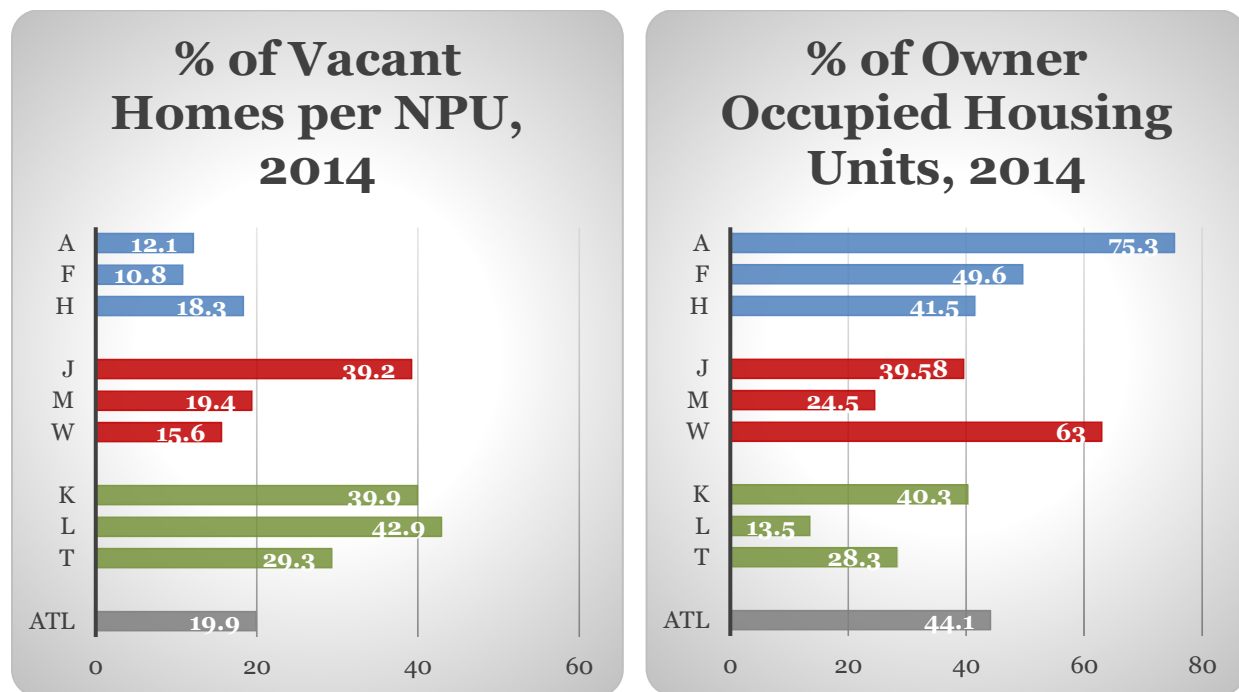


Figure 19: Percentage of vacant homes and owner-occupied housing units per NPU, 2014; Source: WCA Data Dashboard

NPUs with low traditional school discontinuity experienced lower than average vacant property rates, and two of the three had higher than average owner occupied units. Home ownership tends to be a strong community stabilizer. Only one of the three NPUs that experienced high traditional school closures had above average home ownership rates.

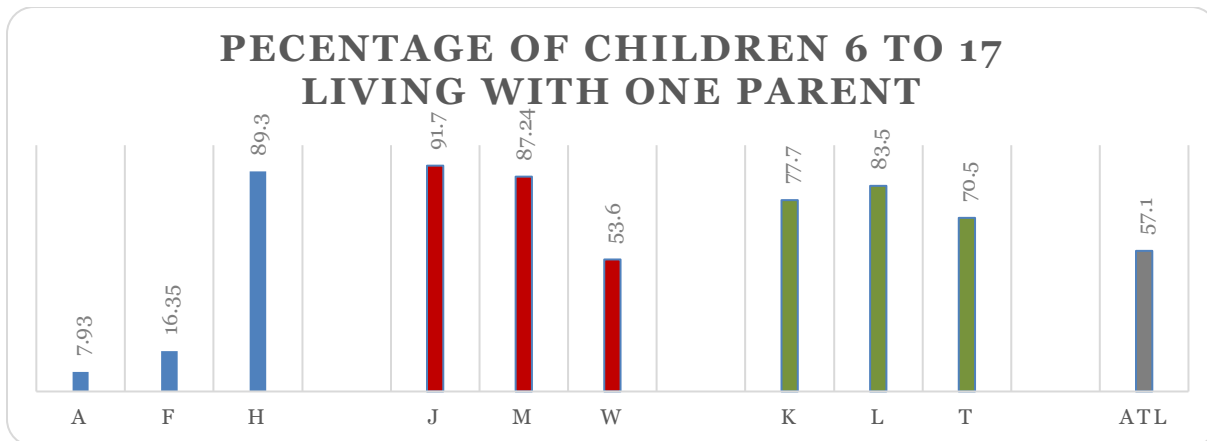


Figure 20: Percentage of children ages 6-17 living in single-parent homes per NPU, 2014; Source: WCA Data Dashboard

Again, with the exception of NPU H, communities that experienced little disturbance of their public schools showed higher than average home stability as defined by the number of parents living in the household. In contrast, two of the three NPUs with high public school disruption experience above average rates of children being raised in a single-parent home. Some disparity can also be seen in access to health insurance between the two groups as well.

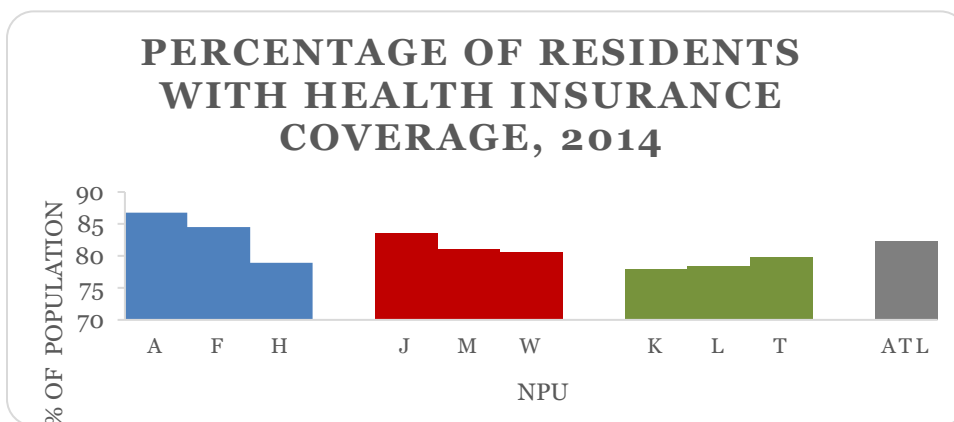


Figure 21: Percentage of residents with health insurance coverage per NPU, 2014; Source: WCA Data Dashboard

## Discussion

Although there were some outliers, the collected data showed that most school closures were located in what are today the city's poorest areas. The data also showed that communities that experienced a disproportionate number of traditional school closings tended to be predominantly black. This local finding coincides with national trends. Further research on the subject is highly recommended, particularly because the available school closure data was limited.

School closures were less visible in the northern part of Atlanta, where its wealthier residents reside. NPU A, which saw consolidations and reuse of its school properties, experienced no permanent school property closures. This stability is seen in most aspects of community life including a long standing high standard of living, yet NPU A has been the recipient of the most expensive high school project in Georgia history. North High School, built near the northern edge of the city cost \$147 million dollars and was a result of the consolidation of two high schools. The NPU has a total of four public schools within its borders and six private primary and secondary schools, more than any other NPU in the city. This community, with its school stability and investments, has been able to maintain a high quality of life.

It should also be noted that the Westside community, made up of NPUs K, L, and T, experienced a lot of shuffling of their students while this report was being written. Elementary-age students from the now closed Bethune Academy were temporarily moved to the previous Kennedy Middle School property this school year, while their new site is completed. This transition was highly contended by parents and local leaders, as it was seen as an unnecessary interruption of the student's stability. The community strongly agreed that it would be in the student's best interest to stay in their facility until the completion of the new one. The APS board, however, cited issues with the property as their reasoning for the relocation. The superintendent's response included the high cost of a new AC system installation (approximately \$20,000; a cost that parents were willing to assume) and the Bethune building's poor condition. Before the matter was settled with the community, news that Centennial Charter School would be

using the now vacant Bethune property as a temporary site broke. Residents of the Westside community struggle to understand the logic of this decision. They do not understand the refusal to have their students remain in place in order to provide a charter school a temporary site.

During a meeting in June, 2016, the APS superintendent and three board members were asked why some Westside community students had been temporarily moved to the Grady cluster until it was awarded extra money to accommodate the influx of students. An APS board member responded by noting that more money was spent per student at Washington High School, a Westside community school, than at any other high school in the city. The statement was then clarified by a Westside community member, Valerie Williams, who explained that although this claim was correct, the number was misleading. She went on to explain that more money was spent on a per child basis at Washington High because there were far fewer students attending the school and the additional money had been used for much needed mold remediation that had gone unchecked. None of the additional funds were used for programming or needed technology as the community had requested.

Residents and community groups tend to view neighborhood schools as community assets and the Westside community is fearful that their schools are not being recognized as such by the school district. This recognition is particularly important in historically black neighborhoods such English Avenue and Vine City in Atlanta. The abovementioned interactions are just a few examples of the apparent disconnect between what the residents of this poor community want and what the district finds necessary to give. Communication between this community's residents and their school representatives had a notable tone of deeply rooted mistrust and mutual disrespect.

The Westside community finds itself fighting for basic educational expectations such as specific transitional plans for their relocated students instead of receiving copies of detailed plans written for students on the east side of the city. They ask for clarification on whether Washington High, the first school to offer schooling past the sixth grade to

African Americans in the city of Atlanta, is facing state intervention. They ask that elementary school children not be unnecessarily moved to make room for charter schools.

Byron Amos, the area's representative in the APS Board of Education, admitted during a separate meeting, that the district was in fact being "disrespectful to the Westside today, the same as when [he] attended the same schools". When probed about the reasoning, he explained that perhaps it is due to the fact that "this was the most organized the Westside had been in two decades". The question then beckons, are schools sometimes closed arbitrarily? And more importantly, what comes first, school closures or weakened communities?

It can be said, based on the data collected for this report, that there appears to be a correlation between school closures and the success of a community. Communities with frequent disruption to their public school institutions tend to be, by most measurable indicators, weaker than communities that experience stability in this respect. School closures tend to impact communities negatively, and based on the data collected, it can also be said that closing schools do not improve the quality of life of local residents as intended.

The question of which comes first, the weak community or the closed school is a challenging one to answer. However, considering Georgia's record of closing schools in thriving black communities in the 60s, for this state in particular, the sequence may be easier to observe. The sudden and rapid building of black schools to fend off integration had a very negative impact on black communities in the long term. The refusal of white families to send their children to black schools created a surplus of school buildings that often sat empty in black neighborhoods for decades at a time, yet this was the acceptable scenario for law makers.

It is then fair to say, that the closure of a community's anchor, when replaced with an abandoned building, takes a toll on a community. In addition, the consequential

reduction of these communities' most respected and high paying jobs, teachers and school administrators, combined with its residents' inability to secure home loans due to discriminatory housing policies, lead to deteriorating conditions. It is also fair to say that once the fabric of a community breaks down, its children show up less prepared to learn. This fact, along with shrinking budgets due to falling property prices and inexperienced teachers, is bound to create a school that underperforms.

The data and analysis, along with the literature review, showed that school closures have, for the most part, negatively impacted communities in this state. And data is yet to be found that shows that the closure of neighborhood schools improves the welfare of its residents. In the case of the city of Atlanta itself, one has to take into account the great economic loss that came with white flight. Redlining policies left black families to again educate their children in underfunded, segregated schools, which are now being closed at alarming rates. And to make matters worse, communities that have been weakened for decades will, starting this school year, be expected to have the knowhow and resources to make their schools thrive or face closure.

## Recommendations

There is no simple solution to a problem that has been forming for over three centuries. However, it is important that all players; policy makers, the city planning community, school representatives, local community members, and students themselves understand the problem before they attempt to fix it. Underperforming schools were not created in a vacuum. They are the result of hundreds of years of U.S. policies built to subjugate a portion of its citizens. Understanding this is critical because it an injustice to have children and poor communities internalize the failure of an entire system. And it is important for decision makers to deal with the real issues at hand.

A short list of recommendations for different stakeholders has been compiled. Many of these suggestions come from previous researchers, and this list is by no means exhaustive. It is meant to begin a much-needed dialog about the deeply rooted connection between the health of public education and the success of local communities we strive for.

### Policy Makers

- Further research on this topic should be conducted by the school department and policy makers. When the genuine goal is to do what is best for students, basic research about the consequences of policies should be expected. Looking back at history, it may have been wise to research the consequences of neglecting the education of Africa American children, the rushed building of hundreds of schools in an effort to outsmart federal laws, the consequences of token desegregation, the impact of charter schools, and now the consequences of school closures.
- Future school related policies should attempt to maintain stability within communities. Closing bad schools only to replace them with equally bad ones is an expensive and futile endeavor. A better approach might be to incentivize quality, experienced educators to teach in high-need schools. Better the rate of new teacher retention by having strong mentor programs, minimizing testing to allow educators more time to teach, and create programs that minimize the

number of new teachers that must work in schools that require more experience while they strengthen their skills.

- Encourage new charter schools to be situated in areas where there is greater need, utilize school buildings that would otherwise sit empty, retain traditional school names and let go of the notion that they have the privilege to grow one grade at a time as is required in Newark, NJ, one the nation's top performing states. This would cement schools as the anchor of communities and have them do what they originally set out to do, which was to provide quality educational options for all families.

### The Planning Community

- City planners are trained to forecast population growth and migration. The forecasted changes in population should be combined with a thorough understanding of changing school policies in order to better prevent such closures and remedy their effects. Measures should be taken so that the planning community is better versed in the vital issue that is education. Currently, too few planners understand education sufficiently to make good decisions about basic issues such as housing, density and zoning.
- There is a great need for strong collaboration between the planning profession and educators. Planners can assist school districts in making decisions about closed school properties in a broader context, and educators understand the details of community in ways that planners can only dream. A strong working relationship between these two disciplines is vital.
- Use schools as the link between planning and public health. As noted by professor Botchwey from Georgia Tech, use schools as resource centers, meeting places and organizational features in the community.
- Strategic plans should take note of local school successes and failures. Clear and specific decisions need to be included in the plans to better guarantee the success of current and future schools.



- Be part of local school GO Teams whenever possible. Be the community member, the parent, or the swing vote that provides the team with the appreciable understanding of the greater city context.

### School Representatives

- The State Board of Education and local school systems should be required to keep public if not better records of their school closures. It is a fundamental right of city residents to have access to such information when faced with decisions such as the one they will be asked to make come November. Residents need to be informed, so that they can make educated decisions about the fate of their schools. Researchers should be able to locate such data in order to help inform the public without having to scavenge.
- Treat all communities; poor, rich, organized, or those that lack resources with the same level of respect and consideration.
- Detailed plans should be in place that equip currently struggling communities that will now be tasked with managing their own schools. The disparity of resources should be obvious to all involved and measures should be taken to guarantee equity under the new charter school system structure.
- School districts are responsible maintenance, security, and insurance while they find new occupants of closed properties. According to the Pew Charitable Trust report, “this helps explain why the net operating savings achieved by closing a building typically is less than \$1 million.” The complexity of the local real estate market, local policy constraints, the length of time a property has been closed, location and age of the property, all tend to make school closings less economically efficient than districts predict. Serious consideration should be placed on the true value of closing schools that have the possibility of sitting empty for decades.
- Even though selling a property can release a school district from costs and liabilities and furnishes often needed funds, leasing is sometimes a better option. Leasing keeps the property in public hands, guarantees the district more say over its future use, and reduces the time a property stays underutilized. Leasing

expedites the transformation from school to active use, a fact that can be make a significant difference in the livelihood of a community.

- Include added clauses and deeds to sell contracts to prevent misuse or underutilization of purchased properties.
- Utilize joint-use agreements that allow community residents use of public school facilities. This will create strong bonds between schools and the residents they serve.

### Community Members

- As emphasized by Stimson et al., it is important for a community to have access to external resources. As community leaders, take note of all the resources that can be called upon by community members. No resource is too big or small.
- Identify the community's strong communicators and develop liaisons with the media. Guarantee your community the voice it may be lacking due to poverty.
- Now that APS is moving towards a charter system, schools can double as community centers for after school activities, senior citizens' gyms, health facilities or English classes. Other uses can include night school for adults (trades or GED classes), community meeting spaces, use of recreational areas (playgrounds, baseball fields), cultural centers, public libraries, technology access for the community, health screening facilities, use of the auditorium for community concerts, business incubators, and police stations.
- Hold your elected officials responsible. If your district representative is not representing your community, have them replaced.

## Conclusion

The issue of school closures and how they impact local communities is extremely complex. Many contributing factors were beyond the scope of this research but should be carefully studied. The quality of a community's schooling is critical. It determines who avoids ever making that community their home, who does move in and who moves out. Those with few mobility options are forced to stay and make the best of the situation. It effects the quality of life for children who live in the community at the moment, and it is a good predictor of the quality of life they are likely to have as adults. There is a significant amount of research that makes this undeniable. School closures are closely linked to the quality of a community's education and the subsequent funding available. The question at hand is no longer whether a closure impacts a community, but whether the closure of a neighborhood school is the cause or the symptom of the problem. And it appears that this is a circular argument.

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Cover photo: Empty George W. Adair School in Adair Park. Photo by Amber Rhea.

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